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STATE FOR NEA/FO (WELCH AND GRAY), NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER MASS KDEM TS

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR FOREIGN MINISTER ABDALLAH'S VISIT

REF: TUNIS 699

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) FOREIGN MINISTER ABDELWAHEB ABDALLAH'S UPCOMING JUNE 11-15 VISIT TO WASHINGTON PRESENTS A RARE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE USG TO ENGAGE THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF THE GOT, AS OFFICIAL VISITS TO WASHINGTON ARE INFREQUENT. WHILE ABDALLAH WILL LIKELY TRY TO EMPHASIZE GENERALITIES ABOUT THE US-TUNISIAN LONG-STANDING, STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BASED ON SHARED REGIONAL OBJECTIVES AND COUNTERTERRORISM COOPERATION, HIS MEETINGS ARE AN OPPORTUNITY TO PRESS THE GOT FOR TANGIBLE REFORMS AND ACTION. GIVEN PRESIDENT BEN ALI'S MAY 31 COMMENTS TO CODEL TANNER (REFTEL), US OFFICIALS SHOULD INDICATE THAT THE UNITED STATES WANTS TO SEE THE RHETORIC EVOLVE INTO GENUINE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM, ESPECIALLY IN THE FACE OF A GROWING DOMESTIC AND REGIONAL TERRORIST THREAT. THIS VISIT PRESENTS AN OPPORTUNITY TO INDICATE THE UNITED STATES EXPECTS MORE FROM THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP, PARTICULARLY ON REGIONAL ISSUES, AND IS READY TO SUPPORT TUNISIA'S POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SECURITY INITIATIVES. SUGGESTED THEMATIC POINTS FROM WHICH WASHINGTON INTERLOCUTORS MAY WISH TO DRAW ARE PROVIDED AT PARA 9. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

¶2. (C) ABDALLAH, WHO FONDLY RECALLS HIS INITIAL OCTOBER 2005 MEETINGS WITH US OFFICIALS IN WASHINGTON, IS MORE COMFORTABLE DISCUSSING FOREIGN POLICY (ISRAEL-PALESTINE ISSUES, LIBYA, IRAN, OR TERRORISM) THAN DEBATING DOMESTIC MATTERS. ABDALLAH CAN BE CHARISMATIC AND CHARMING IN MEETINGS, DISPLAYING AN EASY CONFIDENCE THROUGH WHICH HE SEEKS TO GIVE HIS INTERLOCUTORS THE IMPRESSION THAT HE IS REALLY "CONSULTING" WITH THEM. WHAT HE SAYS, HOWEVER, RARELY OR BARELY DEPARTS FROM STANDARD GOT TALKING POINTS -- POINTS ABOUT THE GOT'S SELF-PROJECTED IMAGE OF TUNISIA AS A MODERN, MODERATE, RESPONSIBLE PARTNER. HE HAS BEEN KNOWN TO SPEND OVER A HALF HOUR DELIVERING TEDIOUS OPENING REMARKS ON TUNISIA'S POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SUCCESSES AND MODERATE VIEWS ON REGIONAL ISSUES. THEY ALSO HAPPEN TO BE POINTS THAT ABDALLAH HIMSELF LARGELY CRAFTED DURING HIS YEARS AS THE PRESIDENTIAL ADVISOR ENTRUSTED WITH KEEPING THE DOMESTIC MEDIA STIFLED AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA AND NGO CRITICISM OF TUNISIA VIGOROUSLY CHALLENGED AND PUBLICLY REJECTED. ALMOST TWO YEARS AFTER BEING NAMED FOREIGN MINISTER, ABDALLAH STILL EXERTS SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE AND PERHAPS CONTROL OVER THE LOCAL MEDIA.

¶3. (C) DURING HIS JUNE 6 MEETING WITH ABDALLAH, THE AMBASSADOR STRESSED THAT THE FOREIGN MINISTER SHOULD CONSIDER WHAT KIND OF CONCRETE CONTRIBUTIONS TUNISIA CAN MAKE TO SUPPORT US OBJECTIVES IN THE REGION, PARTICULARLY IN SUDAN, AFGHANISTAN AND WITH THE PALESTINIANS. THE AMBASSADOR ALSO ENCOURAGED ABDALLAH TO CONSIDER SPECIFIC STEPS TOWARDS POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM. ABDALLAH SAID THAT HE WOULD BE MEETING WITH PRESIDENT ZINE EL ABIDINE BEN ALI ON JUNE 7 TO OBTAIN THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE FOR THE VISIT. REGARDING CONCRETE ACTIONS, ABDALLAH SAID THAT HE WOULD THINK ABOUT WHAT TUNISIA COULD OFFER. ABDALLAH ADDED THAT HE PLANS TO INVITE THE SECRETARY TO VISIT TUNISIA, NOTING THAT HE DID NOT BELIEVE SECRETARY RICE HAD BEEN TO NORTH AFRICA AND THAT THE MIDDLE EAST INCLUDES MORE THAN THE GULF AND THE LEVANT.

REGIONAL ISSUES

¶4. (S) ALTHOUGH TUNISIA IS LIKE-MINDED ON IRAQ, IRAN, THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN SITUATION, AND OTHER REGIONAL ISSUES, THE GOT HAS DONE RELATIVELY LITTLE TO HELP US POLITICAL AND MILITARY EFFORTS IN THE REGION. THE TUNISIAN EMBASSY IN IRAQ REMAINS OPEN AND THE GOT HAS PROVIDED SOME TRAINING FOR GOI OFFICIALS. HOWEVER, MINISTER OF DEFENSE KAMEL MORJANE RECENTLY TOLD VISITING DASD THERESA WHELAN AND THE AMBASSADOR THAT, "THE REGIME CANNOT SURVIVE" IF IT PUT PERSONNEL IN IRAQ OR AFGHANISTAN. INDEED, REGIME SECURITY IS SO IMPORTANT TO THE GOT, IT IS NOT CLEAR THE GOT HAS A CLEAR FOREIGN POLICY OTHER THAN TO "GET ALONG." ABDALLAH'S GENERALITIES SHOULD NOT BE TAKEN AS INDICATIVE OF ACTIVE GOT SUPPORT FOR US GOALS IN THE REGION. HE SHOULD BE REMINDED THAT TUNISIA'S MODERATION DOES NOT HELP US UNLESS ITS VIEWS ARE MADE PUBLIC AND ITS INFLUENCE USED ACTIVELY IN KEY MEETINGS AND FORA.

COUNTERTERRORISM COOPERATION

¶5. (C/NF) TUNISIAN OFFICIALS ARE CLEARLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE REGIONAL TERRORIST THREAT FOLLOWING THE DISRUPTION OF A TERRORIST CELL IN DECEMBER 2006/JANUARY 2007. DESPITE THESE CONCERNS, CIVILIAN AND SECURITY OFFICIALS CONTINUE TO STATE THAT THE DOMESTIC SITUATION IS UNDER CONTROL. ALTHOUGH THESE OFFICIALS INFORMED THE AMBASSADOR THAT THE US (AND UK) EMBASSY AND PERSONNEL WERE AMONG THE GROUPS INTENDED TARGETS, THE GOT HAS PROVIDED EXTREMELY LIMITED INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION ABOUT THE INCIDENT. WHILE ABDALLAH IS KNOWN TO CHARACTERIZE OUR CT RELATIONSHIP AS "EXCELLENT," WASHINGTON OFFICIALS SHOULD DELIVER A STRONG MESSAGE THAT THE USG WANTS MORE DETAILS ON THIS INCIDENT AND OTHER SECURITY ISSUES. THE AMBASSADOR STRESSED TO ABDALLAH IN HIS JUNE 6 MEETING THAT MORE INFORMATION MUST BE SHARED. ABDALLAH AGREED THAT "THERE IS NO REASON" FOR TUNISIA NOT TO DO MORE OR TO KEEP ANY INFORMATION FROM THE UNITED STATES. IF INFORMATION SHARING IMPROVES, A VARIETY OF US INTELLIGENCE RESOURCES COULD SUPPORT GOT EFFORTS TO COMBAT THIS THREAT.

¶6. (C) ON THE MILITARY SIDE, THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE IS EXPRESSING CONCERN ABOUT ITS ABILITY TO CONTROL TUNISIA'S REMOTE BORDERS WITH LIBYA AND ALGERIA. MINISTER OF NATIONAL DEFENSE KAMEL MORJANE USED A SERIES OF MAY MEETINGS WITH US OFFICIALS TO PLEA FOR GREATER US FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR TUNISIAN ARMED FORCES COUNTERTERRORISM ACTIVITIES. FM ABDALLAH IS LIKELY TO RAISE THE GOT'S CONCERN ABOUT FY08 CUTS IN FOREIGN MILITARY FINANCING (FMF) FOR TUNISIA. WHILE COUNTERTERRORISM COOPERATION WITH TUNISIAN SECURITY OFFICIALS LEAVES MUCH TO BE DESIRED, THE TUNISIAN MILITARY IS A HISTORIC US ALLY AND BILATERAL MILITARY COOPERATION IS EXEMPLARY. INCREASED MILITARY ASSISTANCE COULD HELP THE TUNISIAN MILITARY EXPAND ITS INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING EFFORTS, WHICH ARE CURRENTLY HAMPERED BY EQUIPMENT AND SUPPORT LIMITATIONS. WASHINGTON OFFICIALS SHOULD SEEK TO IDENTIFY POSSIBILITIES TO FURTHER US MILITARY ASSISTANCE TO TUNISIA.

ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT

¶7. (C) ALTHOUGH MANY ASPECTS OF OUR BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP ARE HANDICAPPED BY GOT UNWILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE, IT APPEARS THERE IS A REAL INTEREST -- FROM THE HIGHEST LEVELS -- IN INCREASING ECONOMIC TIES. RECENTLY, PRESIDENT BEN ALI, SENIOR MINISTERS AND PRIVATE BUSINESSMEN HAVE ALL EXPRESSED AN INTEREST IN EXPANDING TRADE AND INVESTMENT RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES. ABDALLAH RESPONDED POSITIVELY TO THE AMBASSADORS JUNE 6 SUGGESTION THAT ABDALLAHS VISIT BE USED TO PROMOTE ECONOMIC TIES. THE AMBASSADOR NOTED THAT TUNISIA COULD TAKE ADDITIONAL CONCRETE STEPS TOWARD ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION IN ORDER TO ATTRACT MORE US INVESTMENT.

POLITICAL REFORM

¶8. (S/NF) IN THE TWO YEARS SINCE THE LAUNCH OF THE PRESIDENT BUSH'S FREEDOM AGENDA, DESPITE SIGNIFICANT PUBLIC AND PRIVATE USG EFFORTS, TUNISIA HAS MADE LITTLE TANGIBLE PROGRESS TOWARD POLITICAL REFORM. PRESIDENT BEN ALI HAS GIVEN SOME INDICATIONS TO US OFFICIALS THAT SUGGEST HE IS OPEN TO GREATER POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION, INCLUDING HIS RECENT COMMENT TO CODEL TANNER THAT HE WANTS TO WEAKEN THE RULING DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTIONAL RALLY (RCD) PARTY AND ALLOW THE OPPOSITION TO STRENGTHEN (REFTEL). FOR NOW, THOUGH, THE GOT CONTINUES TO CONTROL ALMOST ALL ASPECTS OF POLITICAL LIFE. ABDALLAH'S VISIT IS A KEY OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD ON PRESIDENT BEN ALI'S UNDERTAKING BY ENCOURAGING SPECIFIC ACTIONS TO PROOFREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSOCIATION. FOR EXAMPLE, TUNISIA SHOULD UNBLOCK INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS WEBSITES SUCH AS THE TUNISIA-SPECIFIC PORTIONS OF THE AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH SITES. PRESS FREEDOM SHOULD ALSO BE PROMOTED THROUGH THE LICENSING OF NEW MEDIA. WHILE ABDALLAH WILL BE QUICK TO ARGUE THAT TUNISIA MUST UNDERTAKE GRADUAL REFORMS TO PREVENT ISLAMIC EXTREMISTS FROM GAINING INFLUENCE, HE SHOULD BE REMINDED THAT MODERATE VOICES MUST HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE HEARD.

SUGGESTED THEMES

¶9. (C) WASHINGTON INTERLOCUTORS MAY WISH TO DRAW ON THE FOLLOWING POINTS IN THEIR DISCUSSIONS WITH FM ABDALLAH:

-- REGIONAL CONTEXT: WE APPRECIATING THE MODERATING ROLE THAT TUNISIA PLAYS, BUT WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE MORE CONCRETE MANIFESTATIONS OF TUNISIAN SUPPORT IN THE REGION.

-- SECURITY COOPERATION: OUR TWO COUNTRIES SHARE COMMON VALUES, WHICH ARE REFLECTED IN A COMMON STAND AGAINST TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM. WE WOULD WELCOME INCREASED COOPERATION ON COUNTERTERRORISM. SPECIFICALLY, WE ARE SEEKING MORE AND BETTER INFORMATION ABOUT THE DECEMBER 2006/JANUARY 2007 SECURITY INCIDENTS, IN WHICH OUR EMBASSY AND PERSONNEL WERE REPORTEDLY AMONG THE TARGETS. THE UNITED STATES IS PREPARED TO DO OUR PART TO HELP COUNTER THE GROWING REGIONAL THREAT OF TERRORISM.

-- ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT: TUNISIA DESERVES CREDIT FOR ITS SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS. WE SHARE YOUR DESIRE TO SEE INCREASED TRADE AND INVESTMENT. TO ATTRACT GREATER US INVESTMENT, WE ENCOURAGE TUNISIA TO CONTINUE DOWN THE PATH TO A MORE OPEN MARKET (E.G., PERMIT FRANCHISING).

-- POLITICAL REFORM: WE ALSO ENCOURAGE THE GOT TO PROMOTE INCREASED DIALOGUE ON POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES. TUNISIA IS READY FOR GREATER DEMOCRATIC FREEDOMS, INCLUDING FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION. SPECIFICALLY, THE GOT COULD UNBLOCK SEVERAL INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS WEBSITES THAT ARE CURRENTLY INACCESSIBLE IN TUNISIA.

-- IF TUNISIA IS PREPARED TO DO MORE ON KEY ISSUES OF CONCERN TO THE UNITED STATES, E.G., REGIONAL CHALLENGES AND/OR POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION, WE ARE PREPARED TO LOOK FOR OTHER

WAYS TO DEEPEN OUR ENGAGEMENT.
GODEC